

Mr. Blades and "Claire"

By CONSTANCE MURRAY GREENE

LESLIE BURTON BLADES had just been interviewed by a brilliant woman when I talked with him. I got him on the rebound. It is doubtful if he will ever again give such an interview as he gave that woman. Every now and then he would chuckle appreciatively. At first I set myself go so far as to think that we had something in common, that he was enjoying me, in other words, but when I pinned him down it was always the other woman. So I decided to confine myself to facts—and here they are.

Blades is tall, fair and gay and he has been blind for eighteen of his twenty-seven years. The same dauntless spirit which prevented his taking a dare as a small boy and made him light the giant firecracker that blew off parts of three most useful fingers on his right hand at the same time that it took his sight, is with him yet. The things he likes best are skating, swimming, Edgar Lee Masters's poetry, New York and writing. He writes on an average one short story a week and occasionally a novel slips from his pen, which sounds easy, but Mr. Blades confessed that he rewrote the beginning of *Claire* ten times before he was satisfied. *Claire*, which has just made its debut, is his first published novel, although he has written another and is at work on a third. He has given *Claire* a blind hero and a great deal of his own philosophy of life. The end had to be rewritten for the serial publication because the editor felt that a struggle in which a lady and a meat knife and a gentleman who was in her way formed the blood and thunder combination might damage the reputation of his magazine. Not so the book, which he frankly intended for a best seller and has no reputation so far. Mr. Blades disclaims any higher aim for the book than material success, which impresses me as being a bit of charmingly good taste because he knows of course what its high and certain message will be to others.

After Blades refused to take the dare he was sent to the Colorado State School for the Blind, where he studied for six years. Then his family, in the delicate words of the publicity men, "lost their all" and the boy was thrown upon his own resources. He undertook to put himself through college—and succeeded—just as he now succeeds in selling everything he writes. You can't help losing a little breath at his courage. But perhaps this wasn't any more daring than it is now for him to go about the streets of New York alone on four months acquaintance.

"I had a scholarship at Colorado College and was making my own living," he said. "I was getting along splendidly until I got tangled up in the annual Freshman-Sophomore fight, took a pretty prominent part in it, in fact. They told me that a scholarship man was supposed to be on the side of the faculty and not the students. I left."

"Wasn't that almost too desperate of you?" I asked, and quite as obviously, "How did you dare?"

"Oh, I never take anything seriously," he laughed. "I entered the Theological Seminary at the University of Oregon and preached for two years, but I made no converts and was finally dropped from the church for radicalism. There was nothing particularly individual about this, as it was happening all the time. The difference was that the other students became liberals. I believe mine was the only case where the offender was actually expelled from the church. I had been giving music lessons, mostly to preachers who wanted to learn to play hymns. Of course it was a bore. But I used to have a lot of fun on my trips through the country. The elders of the churches would chew tobacco while I was preaching, thinking I couldn't see. I couldn't, but I knew they were chewing. However, as I was in the habit of stealing behind the church for a smoke before and after service, I didn't complain."

"I took my degree at the University of Oregon, but I never called for it and I guess it's still at the registrar's office. You have to pay \$10 for a degree. I taught for a time in the English department and squandered my money and when summer came I discovered that I was dead broke. I had made it a rule never to call on my family for money and so I sold papers in San Francisco. I had to work pretty hard. First I would sell from seven in the morning to nine at night with no rest or food, and again from ten to two the next morning. I don't suppose I sounded typical as newsboy. I just called out anything I thought of, but I made money and after two weeks I stopped work and began to squander it again. My boss felt worse than I did. He made a half cent on every paper, while I made only a quarter of a cent."

I wanted to know how long it would take to squander two weeks' earnings as a newsboy.

"It didn't cost much to sail back and forth along the California coast on tramps," Mr. Blades assured me. "That's what I did and I had a fine summer with all the money I wanted. But the best summer I ever had was back in the early days [which being interpreted means 1917] when I was writing for the *Los Angeles Tribune*. I roamed about southern California, sleeping on the sand, swimming and fishing, and all the while I was writing articles telling the people that what they needed was Red Blood—more out of doors. It was during this time that the inspiration for *Claire* came to me—the opening scene where the girl and the blind man are shipwrecked. I know how it would feel to be shipwrecked. I used to think about it as I swam about alone."

I ended our talk by asking Mr. Blades if he thinks such a woman as *Claire*, she of the meat knife, really exists.

"I do think she exists. I know she exists," he said. "I know *Claire*."

Come back! In reviewing *Claire* for *Books and the Book World* Mr. Frank M. O'Brien had remarked that the author had not judged it worth while to interpolate in his novel an explanation of how blind men take long walks. Well, then, Mr. Blades wishes to give an explanation on behalf of all the blind men in the world as to how they are able to take long country walks and do all the things we marvel at. "People who see," he says, "spend a good part of their time looking at their feet. If they don't they fall down. Blind people just use human intelligence if they have it. If they haven't—they don't walk, and the sooner the rest of the excited race understands it the better."

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